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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PSL PARTY TOES THE (RULING) PARTY LINE

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The Ambassador discussed Tunisia's political scene with opposition Social Liberal Party (PSL) Secretary General Mondher Thabet on November 5. Thabet expressed his support for President Ben Ali's policies, called for increased bilateral economic cooperation and denounced the recent PDP hunger strike. Although the Ambassador emphasized the need for increased freedom of expression and freedom of association, Thabet did not stray from the usual GOT talking points. End Summary.

Political Platform

¶2. (C) On November 5, the Ambassador paid a courtesy call on the GOT-loyal opposition Social Liberal Party (PSL) Secretary General Mondher Thabet. Thabet began by saying his

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party was in the midst of "refining its political strategy" to better target young intellectuals. He explained that the PSL strongly supports separation of church and state (attributing political unrest in Egypt to "religious interference in society") and is pro-economic growth. He elaborated that low unemployment and increased development are prerequisites for social reform. Thabet told the Ambassador that the USG should help by supporting the GOT's economic policy and help lower unemployment in Tunisia. The Ambassador replied that if Tunisia opened up its markets to franchises, for example, it would encourage increased American investment. He added that the Embassy hosted an interagency economic delegation in September, and that a US business delegation would be visiting Tunisia in mid-November.

Campaign Season

¶3. (C) The Ambassador noted the importance of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2009. Thabet told the Ambassador, "We (Tunisians) should profit from Ben Ali's leadership to prepare for the future." He added that "Ben Ali is a guarantee of stability, and only Ben Ali can guarantee a peaceful transition." Thabet made this comment official on November 14, when he became the first opposition party leader to officially announce his support for Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's candidacy in the 2009 presidential elections.

Foreign Affairs

¶4. (C) Though several prominent civil society activists have privately thanked the Ambassador for his visit to the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) during their hunger strike (Ref A), Thabet told the Ambassador his visit was ill-received by civil society. He then criticized, at length, former PDP Secretary General Nejib Chebbi and opined that the PDP's strategy was "out of place." He also denounced the PDP's loose alliance with moderate Islamists, adding that PDP officials were "naive" to think Islamists would accept concepts such as the rights of women. Thabet added that it was "silly" of the PDP to provoke the GOT.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador responded that while he was the United States representative to the government of Tunisia, he was also the United States representative to the Tunisian people. He said the USG seeks contact and exchange with all parties that promote democracy. The Ambassador added that the USG recognizes that the democratic process takes time, but progress is necessary. He told Thabet that with a strong track record for promoting women's rights and religious tolerance, Tunisia can afford to pursue further democratic reform. The Ambassador noted that through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Embassy would like to fund such projects. Thabet responded that the Embassy should speak to the GOT, rather than civil society in this regard, so as to "respect sovereignty."

Comment

¶6. (C) For the leader of an opposition party, Thabet spoke surprisingly little about his own party goals and quite a bit about the GOT. The PSL is considered to be a party close to the ruling party, and this was reflected in Thabet's statements. Judging from his comments, the PSL (like the GOT) is comfortable with the status quo, and would prefer the USG concentrate strictly on international investment and economic development, rather than on increased political space and freedom of expression. End Comment.
GODEC